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History & Policy

Policing the Windrush generation

James Whitfield

Executive Summary

- West Indians were the first group of non-white immigrants to settle in Britain in large numbers after World War Two.
- Many arrived with a perception of the 'mother' country that was naïve and left them ill-prepared to deal with the hostility and resentment of the host community.
- The police service, to which immigrants turned for help when confronted with problems associated with racial prejudice, was drawn exclusively from the host community, sharing its attitudes and prejudices.
- It was during the early years of large-scale immigration that attitudes and misconceptions developed between police and West Indian immigrants that resulted in mutual stereotyping.
- Racial prejudice, and the police service's reluctance to see beyond its own priorities to prevent and detect crime, led the Metropolitan Police to reject the West Indian community's offer to assist with police training in community relations at the very time when difficulties between the two sides were becoming apparent.
- Although the Metropolitan Police began racial-awareness training for recruits in 1964, the training was largely tokenistic. Following the Scarman Report of 1981, community and race-relations training for the police was revamped in 1984, but claims of lack of commitment and support at all levels have persisted.
- Current community and race-relations training for Metropolitan Police staff ignores the historic background of difficulties in relations with the black community. As such, new recruits lack an in-depth understanding of the way in which negative feelings on the part of the police towards West Indians in the early years of large-scale immigration fed developing perceptions of the police as being oppressive and racist.

Introduction

In 2004, during the course of research for the book *Unhappy Dialogue* the author discovered that Community and Race Relations Training for Metropolitan Police officers takes as its starting point the 1981 Brixton riots and the ensuing Report by Lord Scarman. The popular perception of when difficulties in the relationship between Britain's black community and the police began similarly posits their origin around about the mid- to late-1970s, when confrontations between black youths and police became the subject of widespread political and media attention. The reality, however, is that the origins of discord between Britain's minority ethnic communities and the police are to be found much earlier, in particular during the peak years of migration

from the West Indies in the 1950s. The arrival in Britain from 1948 onwards of black colonial citizens was unexpected, unplanned and generally unwelcome to politicians and public alike.

The police service in the decade after 1945 was an odd mix of ageing pre-war senior officers, most of whom had no personal experience of policing multi-ethnic communities; and junior ranks, many of whom had been recruited directly after the war from the armed forces. In general, they shared the attitudes and prejudices of the indigenous population. The demise of colonial rule in the 1950s accentuated the pace of decolonisation and hastened the downfall of a system of policing in the colonies that, as the Colonial Police Force Commissioners' Conference noted in 1954, 'had bred a traditional feeling of resentment towards the police as being the strong arm of the imperial power'. Although the majority of those who came from the West Indies at this time were described in Special Branch reports as being somewhat naïve and ill-prepared for life in Britain, it would have been surprising if the attitude of at least some towards the police had not been adversely influenced by their experiences prior to arriving in Britain. It was during this time that the effects of racial stereotyping and rigidity in thought and procedure on the part of the police, coupled with immigrants' misunderstanding of the police's role set in motion the process that would culminate in the mistrust and confrontation of later decades.

Racial stereotypes

In 1998, the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of 482 Jamaican emigrants at Tilbury on the S.S. *Empire Windrush* was commemorated as a seminal moment in Britain's post-war transformation to a multi-cultured, multi-ethnic society. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, the initial indifference of a largely ill-informed host community to the appearance of small numbers of black men in the poorer districts of the nation's major cities soon turned to concern and resentment as their numbers increased. Successive governments failed to inform the British public, especially those living in the already dilapidated and overcrowded districts where many immigrants settled, why it was that people from the Caribbean and the Asian sub-continent were arriving in increasing numbers. The absence of official information merely provided a vacuum that was filled by alarmist sections of the media and certain politicians. Most notable among the latter were Cyril Osborne MP and Norman Pannell MP, who drew attention to a Britain being 'swamped' by dark-faced migrants, whose alien cultures and lifestyles posed a threat to traditional standards and values.

In 1953, and again in 1955 and 1957, the Home Office called for information from local police forces on the degree to which black assimilation in Britain was taking place. Police reports were unequivocal in their assertion that it was black and Asian people who were to blame for their failure to integrate. Reports spoke of immigrants' 'below-par mentality and underlying suspicion of the white race', as well as their 'lack of education, social intercourse and cultural knowledge'. At the same time, they glossed over the fact that white people in the areas surveyed operated a 'social colour bar,' and that 'white inhabitants by a vast majority will not tolerate the coloured people'. At a more general level police reports consistently depicted black men as having a fondness for white prostitutes, of lacking a sense of social responsibility, and of being overly sensitive to racial prejudice. Such stereotypical images, in which black men were associated with 'sordid sexuality', prompted Paul Gilroy to note the way in which during this period sexual relations between black men and white women 'emerged ahead of crime as a theme in the popular politics of immigration control'.

Racial disturbances in Nottingham's St. Ann's district and London's Notting Hill in 1958,

followed a year later by Britain's first racially-motivated murder, prompted leading figures in London's West Indian community to suggest that suitable people from all ethnic groups should enrol as special constables in order to assist the police. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Joseph Simpson, rejected their offer. Other attempts by the Commissioner of the West Indies Federation, Mr Garnet Gordon, to provide cultural-awareness training for police officers in London were also declined. In the early 1960s questions began to be asked as to why it was that, with a minority ethnic population approaching one million, there were no black police officers. The Metropolitan Police made no secret of its opposition to their appointment. Indeed, at a meeting of chief constables at the Home Office in April 1965 the prevailing view was that, while minority ethnic recruitment was acceptable in principle, the British public were not yet ready to accept the idea. Sir Robert Mark was a lone dissenting voice in pointing out that the real reason why so few minority ethnic applicants applied to join the police was because they knew that they would be unwelcome.

Cultural misunderstandings

During this period a significant number of black and Asian immigrants encountered discrimination in the key areas of employment, housing and the provision of goods and services, as well as in the widespread application of a 'colour bar' in places of public resort. While academic interest at the time tended to focus upon these problem areas, relations between immigrants and police were only mentioned, if at all, in passing. Later conflicts between police and members of Britain's black community would receive widespread academic and media attention (notably the Notting Hill Carnival Disturbances, 1976-78; the Brixton and Toxteth riots, 1981; and the Broadwater Farm riot, 1985), but in the early years of large-scale immigration the relationship was either ignored or taken for granted.

Early problems between police and immigrants were, as with society at large, the result of an inability, perhaps unwillingness, to accept what were regarded as alien cultures. Colonial policing practices had led many of the newcomers to believe that, as in their homelands, British police officers would act as arbiters in employment and tenancy disputes, even though such resolutions were not legally enforceable. They also assumed that police would take action against pub landlords and hoteliers when they were refused service on racial grounds. The British police, by contrast, operated within the strict confines of powers prescribed by law, and until the introduction of the limited and belated measures to outlaw racial discrimination in places of public resort set out in the 1965 Race Relations Act, invariably confined their activities in such cases to their common-law power to prevent a breach of the peace.

For many years police officers in Britain drew an operational distinction between criminal matters, for which they had the power of law to enforce, and civil matters, such as disputes and minor assaults, in respect of which they either had no direct powers or their power to take action was limited. It was common practice to inform those involved to seek assistance from a solicitor, Citizen's Advice Bureaux or the Clerk to the Justices at the local Magistrates Court if they wished to pursue a complaint against a third party. In this way, police claimed, their actions were both fair and equitable. Unfortunately, the policy had a most detrimental impact on the trust and confidence of black complainants in situations where an element of racial discrimination was alleged. Not unnaturally, victims interpreted police neutrality in such circumstances as condoning the alleged injustice.

Counterproductive strategies

Moreover, police misunderstanding of Caribbean cultures led to the implementation of strategies that, although sometimes well intentioned, were counter-productive in terms of developing mutual trust and confidence. In 1960 the Metropolitan Police carried out a study of relations between 'white and coloured persons'. It was found that in the Brixton area there was a low risk of racial tension. The local senior police officer reported that the 'coloured' population in the area were fairly well behaved and, provided that the younger, irresponsible, white element could be kept away from the 'coloured' areas, racial disorder would be prevented. In order to achieve this, police tactics included targeted patrols of black areas, including the use of police dogs and the dispersal of all groups of black or white people from the streets.

While keeping irresponsible white people away from immigrant areas might have helped prevent racial disorder, moving along 'well-behaved' black men from their own neighbourhoods was a recipe for resentment. Sir Peter Imbert, former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, explained the thinking behind the policy:

It's often been said that the young Caribbean youth had a street culture, whereas the indigenous youth didn't have a street culture in quite the same way. I think that we in the police didn't understand that. When we saw black youth hanging around street corners we couldn't understand why. We automatically thought - quite wrongly, of course - on every occasion that they were up to no good. But that was because of a lack of understanding of their culture and their way of life.

During the years prior to the 1965 Race Relations Act, many clubs and pubs refused admission and/or service to black customers. As a result, some black entrepreneurs set up their own drinking establishments, a number of which were unlicensed. Police paid particular attention to these premises, which were regularly raided and closed down. This strategy, coming as it did at a time when those frequenting such establishments were invariably unwelcome in regular licensed premises, was almost guaranteed to provoke hostility towards the police. This is not to suggest that the black community was without its criminal and anti-social types, or that there were not some who lived up to the stereotype of the moral corrupter, profiting from the proceeds of prostitution and drug dealing. However, growing mutual antagonism in this period led to a climate in which the police response to black crime was uncompromising firmness, with the end not infrequently being seen to justify the means, and in which the crimes of the individual came to be seen as those of the black community at large.

Community relations

In 1959, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan set up a Royal Commission to consider problems of police accountability and the failure of the police service to recruit and retain officers of a high standard. The Commission's principal recommendations were included in the Police Act of 1964, and a national standard for dealing with complaints against police was introduced. However, the Act failed to alter the much-maligned procedure whereby police officers investigated complaints against their own colleagues. As statistics showed, and as minority ethnic complainants knew only too well, the chances of having a complaint against a police officer sustained were slim. For instance, out of 127 complaints made by black people against the Met between April 1961 and March 1962 only 6 were substantiated. In 1969, five years after the Police Act had changed the complaints procedure, none of the 41 allegations of racial discrimination made against the Metropolitan Police were upheld.

We have seen that in the aftermath of racial disorder in 1958 members of Britain's Caribbean

community urged right-minded people from all ethnic groups to consider supporting the police by becoming special constables; that offers were made to raise police awareness levels of Caribbean cultures; and that in the 1960s there was increasing political support for the recruitment of black and Asian police officers. Yet the police service either refused, or was reluctant to go along with any of these proposals. Part of the problem was the way in which the police saw their role in the community. Although the Metropolitan Police set up its Community Relations Branch in 1968, its purpose was largely to forestall complainants and to gather information for its own use. The concept of 'community relations' was, according to internal research conducted between November 1969 and March 1970, 'poorly understood by many officers'. The authors of the report concluded that the situation was made worse by the reluctance of police officers to change. It was found that there was a fear of dealing with issues in respect of which police 'did not have a great deal of sympathy or understanding'; a blinkered view of community relations in which the police function was seen purely in terms of law enforcement; and a reluctance to see any benefit in what were regarded as social work matters like community relations.

Failure to change

The Metropolitan Police inaugurated its initial programme of race relations training in 1964 five years after it had been encouraged to do so by immigrant representatives. But the training's tokenistic nature, with at least one eye on pacifying the Met's critics, meant that it had little success in changing entrenched attitudes. The Annual Reports of Her Majesty's Chief Inspectors of Constabulary in the 1970s made repeated reference to the improved content and quality of police training in race relations. However, by 1978, the Chief Inspector of Constabulary was forced to admit that, 'It would be futile to deny that there is a problem and that relations [with the black community] are not as good as they might be in some parts of the country.'

Major shortcomings in on-the-job training for constables were highlighted in an internal survey carried out by the Metropolitan Police in January 1983. They revealed the way in which police recruits were pressured to report as many offenders as possible, often for minor breaches of the law, by supervising officers who gave little in the way of practical assistance and who were inclined to be critical if mistakes were made. Such a policy was part of a system of law enforcement in which success was seen almost exclusively in terms of numbers, and was hardly conducive to the development of a philosophy aimed at raising cultural-awareness levels and an understanding of the needs of minority ethnic communities.

Once again the spotlight fell on police race-relations training following Lord Scarman's investigation into the riots of 1981, and resulted in the Police Training Council's 1983 recommendations on future training, *Community and Race Relations Training for the Police*. A report setting out the results of the initial training programme was published in 1984. The author was forced to admit that: 'It may be difficult for some to realise just how much effort it can take to "sell" the idea of racism awareness training to some [police] officers'. Although the Met invested some £780,000 in community and race relations [CRR] training between 1989 and 1998, it kept no accurate figures on the number of its officers who had received it. Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary [HMIC] claimed that he had been, 'unable to find a policy, strategy or plan which outlines the [Met's] commitment to CRR training covering the period 1989-98. There was no substantive evidence of a cohesive and co-ordinated training plan... designed for delivery to the entire workforce'. A number of Met officers who had received training complained of poor leadership, lack of support and commitment from senior officers.

The inevitable outcome was that the pace of change remained very slow, and fifteen years after the implementation of the revamped CRR training initiative, Sir William Macpherson's report into the 1993 murder of Stephen Lawrence concluded that, as a service, the Metropolitan Police was institutionally racist.

Two years later, Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary, in the publication *Policing London 'Winning Consent', A Review of Murder Investigation and Community and Race Relations in the Metropolitan Police*, admitted that in the past the Metropolitan Police at Policy Board level had not given sufficient priority to community and race relations, and suggested that:

the lack of training may well have affected the ability of some members of staff to carry out their duties and responsibilities effectively. Where this lack of training results in a negative experience for a member of the public during an interaction with the [Metropolitan Police], this in turn may well lead to or reinforce the lack of confidence and trust that some communities have in the service they receive.

Sir Robert Mark recalled that when he transferred to the Metropolitan Police in the 1960s, he had found an attitude amongst senior officers that they had nothing to learn from outsiders on the subject of policing. This was one of the reasons why positive offers to assist with police training by West Indian leaders were rejected in 1959. It would appear that little progress had been made in the period up to 1995.

However, the police service, the Metropolitan Police in particular, has done much to learn from the failings highlighted in the Macpherson Report of 1999. The Met's traditional and unique independence from local control came to an end in July 2000 when the Metropolitan Police Authority [MPA] replaced the Home Secretary as police authority for the metropolis. The MPA's strategy for London's police placed high priority on the requirement of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, that public authorities must 'have due regard to the need to tackle racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and promote good race relations'. The government and the police have repeatedly expressed their commitment to developing good relations with all sections of the community, and positive measures have been introduced to encourage more applicants from minority ethnic communities to redress the ethnic imbalance that still exists in police ranks. Yet the danger remains that ultimate success may be difficult to achieve.

Who do the police represent and whom do they serve? In 2004, the MPA's Policy Development Officer was unsure:

They're accountable to the Crown, to the Queen, to the laws of the land and to their own organisation. They're not accountable to the public. That's not to whom they see where their accountability lies...We're hamstrung because they run to the Home Office [if they disagree with us]...and it's this constant struggle of finding out what they do...and they won't tell you any more than what you've asked for.

This suggests that New Scotland Yard remains reluctant to be politically accountable, and would like to retain something of the de facto independence of the days when it was under the direct control of the Home Secretary. Other difficulties include the lack of adequate assessment and supervision of junior officers and probationer constables, a problem highlighted as far back as 1965 and reiterated in the 2002 report by Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary, *Training Matters*. Linked to this is the problem of continual turnover of middle-

ranking staff, especially at the level of chief inspector and superintendent, those most likely to fulfil important liaison roles with local communities.

The essential problem remains a policing culture that, since the inception of the modern police in 1829, has always measured success in terms of the prevention and detection of crime, the maintenance of public order and the prosecution of offenders, and which has historically seen little value in developing community relations. As Julia Smith, former Head of Consultation and Diversity at the MPA emphasised: 'The [Metropolitan Police] culture is not an evaluating culture; it's not a thinking culture; it's not a reflector organisation. It's an activist, and so the activist constantly acts and that's why it's very difficult to effect any lasting change. The core organisation remains unchanged.'

Conclusions

The history of relations between the Windrush generation, their descendants and the British police service is now almost sixty years old. During that time black Britons have grown up well-versed in the origins of the process by which their predecessors contributed to Britain's transformation to a multi-cultural society. Police racial-awareness training has ignored those origins and, in doing so, has prevented police officers from developing a fuller understanding of the factors at play when dealing with black people. This inability was highlighted when the MPA organised a session of one-on-one meetings between black youngsters and police officers in Hackney, London. Julia Smith recalled:

One of the aspects of the training was the young people explaining to the officers why they feel they are not being properly policed, and a lot of it was to do with the history. They were able to say, "Our parents told us about this, our grandparents told us, we've seen it on television." They had come to this training with history. Many of the police officers were saying, "Well it's nothing to do with us. We weren't there, so why are you expecting us to know what attitudes you are coming with?" It took the officers a very long time, and I'm not sure that they left hearing these very clear messages of how current policing is informed by history.

The Metropolitan Police Authority, itself comparatively new and inexperienced, has the enormous task of managing Britain's largest police service, the Metropolitan Police, an organisation that has traditionally exercised a degree of independence from direct supervision unique in British policing. The MPA's commitment to equality in the workplace, and to tackling racial discrimination sits well with the police service's own obligation to recruit a workforce that more accurately reflects multi-ethnic Britain in the twenty-first century. The fact remains, however, that while, under the new pressures of the emergence of international extremism linked to Islamic fundamentalism, there was a 36% increase in the number of Asian people stopped and searched in the twelve months prior to July 2004, the increase in the number of black people who were stopped and searched was even higher, at 38%.

International events since September 2001 have once again placed ethnicity at the forefront of the policing debate, and, if anything, have increased the potential in Britain for suspicion and/or guilt by association and categorisation. Self-congratulatory celebrations of Britain's multi-ethnicity are as yet somewhat premature.

September 2006

Further Reading

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James Whitfield, 'Policing the Windrush generation', *History and Policy*, Policy Paper 45, September 2006 [<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/archive/policy-paper-45.html>]